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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines
Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: *review_editor@platypus1917.org*. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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The Platypus Review

Issue #139 | September 2021

1 **What is capitalism, and why should we be against it?**
Rjurik Davidson, Arthur Dent, Rory Dufficy

3 **The "truth" of Kautsky**
Comments on "Kautsky in the 21st century"
Jules Townshend

4 **To look beyond the border fence**
Reflections on "What is capitalism, and why should we be against it?"
William Briggs

WWW:

Afghanistan
After 20 and 40 years
Chris Cutrone

Beyond racial capitalism
Black Marxism and the question of modernity
Wes Vanderburgh

139

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What is capitalism, and why should we be against it?

Rjurik Davidson, Arthur Dent, Rory Dufficy

On May 22, 2021, the Melbourne chapter of the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a panel at the Clyde Hotel in Carlton, Australia, with Rjurik Davidson (formerly of Overland magazine), Arthur Dent (C21stLeft, formerly of the CPA(M-L)), and Rory Dufficy (writer, researcher, critic) to address the question, "What is capitalism, and why should we be against it?" Ryan Mickler of Platypus moderated the event, the full video of which is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=li8nVnWeUu0/>. What follows is an edited transcript of their discussion.

Opening remarks

Rory Dufficy: I want to acknowledge that I'm speaking to you on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. It is important to make some sort of acknowledgement at an event like this, which concerns itself with the questions we have been sent. The neglect of indigenous responses to colonialism, or the consigning of them to a merely reactive role, rather than a generative theoretical resource for us to build on, has been a frequent historical error of the Left.

The clearest way to begin is to say that capitalism is a mode of production. Engels correctly cites Marx's understanding of capitalism as a mode of production, alongside surplus value, as Marx's critical insights, in his famous speech at Marx's graveside.[1] What does it mean to say that capitalism is a mode of production? Within a given economic or geographic unit, a form of producing and reproducing the means of existence is in the last instance regulative of everyday life. Ironically, capitalism itself allows us to see this, because it's the first mode of production in which we can generate theories of modes of production. The Italian Marxist literary critic, Alberto Asor Rosa, says, the best way to understand any given system is from the perspective of its destruction.[2] That's what capitalism allows us to do.

What characterizes capitalism as a mode of production? Marx comments that "capitalism presents itself to us as an immense accumulation of commodities,"[3] but it's important to note that Marx says "presents." It appears that way to us. The way that capitalism works for us is that everything we do is mediated through money, and money in turn mediates everything else. Therefore, access to money is fundamental to the reproduction of everyday life, for everyone, and that in turn means that wage labor, i.e. working for a payment, rather than being paid in kind or being in some sort of bondage, is the regulative form of labor under capitalism. That is not to say that it is the only form of labor under capitalism, but it is regulative, meaning that most people engage with it and even when they don't engage in wage labor, like people in conditions of modern slavery, that modern slavery is still frequently hidden within a labor contract that pretends to be wage labor.

Most people could agree with that neutral description of capitalism, including people who are not revolutionaries, Marxists, or socialists of any kind. But whether capitalism is contradictory is a more complex question and a more challenging one. To simplify, I align with Marx when he writes in the *Grundrisse* that, "Capital itself is the moving contradiction, in that it presses to reduce labor-time to a minimum while it posits labor-time on the other side as the sole measure and source of wealth."[4]

I think all surplus-producing modes of production, which is every mode of production besides a hunter-gatherer mode of production, are inherently unstable because they have a class of people, whether they be priests, capitalists, aristocrats, who rely on the labor of others to survive.

The particular contradictions of capitalism produce more notable effects than the contradictions in a different mode of production. Capitalism's feats of production would be essentially indistinguishable from magic to previous societies. The kinds of things we can make and produce, like a Large Hadron Collider, are essentially magic. But the second contradiction, and the more important one for our purposes, is that it is capital, or capitalism, that gives us the potential to free ourselves from the realm of need, or what Marx would call prehistory, for the first time.[5]

On the change of capitalism over time and the role of class struggle and the Left, I will begin with the old joke about Marxists predicting 20 of the last four crises of capitalism. Marxism has a tendency, and I think it is a tendency that is produced by capitalism, to think about these big questions in a dogmatic way that is not necessarily helpful. With that said, I'm about to be very dogmatic, and that's to return to Marx's quote on capitalism's moving contradiction. He's very precise there. It's not a static contradiction, but a moving one: homeostasis is impossible under capitalism. It develops tendentially. Over the last two or three centuries especially (although you can see this in preceding centuries) we have seen the absolutely astonishing emergence — out of unrepeatable circumstances and configurations of class power, blood, treasure — of our current situation from what was a backwards corner of the planet in the 16th century. Fredric Jameson, writing about the German filmmaker Alexander Kluge's nine-hour film about Marxism, *Notes from Ideological Antiquity* (2009), writes:

> For the concept of antiquity may have the function of placing us in some new relationship with the Marxian tradition and with Marx himself — as well as Eisenstein. Marx is neither actual nor outmoded: he is classical, and the whole Marxist and Communist tradition, more or less equal in duration to Athens's golden age, is precisely that golden age of the European left, to be returned to again and again with the most bewildering and fanatical, productive and contradictory results. And if it is objected that it would be an abomination to glamorize an era that

Jameson correctly identifies the history of the European left as an essentially closed object. Let's take as our markers the year of revolutions and the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), and 1998. I was looking at poetically appropriate things that happened in 1998 to signal this shift. To list a few: the European Central Bank is established, Google and Tencent are both founded, Osama bin Laden-linked embassy bombings occur, which are a foreboding of another period of history, and John Howard loses the popular vote but wins power anyway. But I find most appropriate for our purposes: in St Petersburg, Nicholas II of Russia and his family are re-buried or re-interred in St Catherine Chapel, 80 years after they were killed by Bolshevik revolutionaries in 1918. The signal country of the 20th century ends with this burial.

That was the epoch of what the left-communist French collective Théorie Communiste would call programmatism. It was the era of the party and of the proletariat as mass social body. Exactly this period made modern society. The great history of the European left by Geoff Eley is called *Forging Democracy* (2002) for a reason. The achievement of the programmatic workers movement was the apparatus of the modern bourgeois state itself, with democratic representation, juridical equality, etc. But that dynamic of workers' struggle interacting with mammoth developments in the productivity of capital could not last. In the 1960s and 70s — to telescope the story massively — a crisis of profitability interacted with proletarian self-activity that resulted in the breakdown of this mass worker subject. Crucially, this mass subject was based on a white, male wage laborer. This panel is exemplary of the problem the Left had with its adherence to this white, male position. In the 60s and 70s, those last traces of spaces outside capital are finally erased, and those spaces might be re-doubts of working-class solidarity that have been built, they might be the last groups of hunter-gatherers and so on that are subsumed into capitalist society, or peasants in China, or it might even be the psyche itself which is progressively colonized from this period onwards.

In some ways that leaves us significantly better off; I certainly wouldn't complain about living in a period with modern dentistry, for example. But it also leaves us progressively stripped of the last vestiges of pre-capitalist relations. Our very sociality itself is now mediated through capitalist production, or if not capitalist production, through a commodity. I think in a way the history of the last five years or so is exemplary of this. I often ask myself how, in the anglophone world, every leader is a kind of caricature of the cliché of that country: Trump the boorish American, Johnson the stuffy fool and Morrison, whose only competence would appear to be barbequing. But you could equally say that of Macron, Bolsonaro, Netenyahu, Putin, Trudeau, Duterte, all these people are essentially images of leaders.

The era of Marx ended in this period. That is not to say that Marx has no value, or that class struggle doesn't occur — it occurs all the time and in all sorts of ways — and I think from the perspective of the bird's eye history that we are conducting here, we could say that some class struggles are more important than others, and from our perspective the Chinese class struggle over the next decades will be determinative in many ways.

To address Platypus, I hesitate to make great statements about the Left, partly because we are either going to talk about it in a sociological sense: the Left as a marker of a more progressive current in capitalist society, drawing from the way in which the different parties were laid out in the post-revolutionary French parliament. That Left has to contain some liberals who are objectively pro-capitalist, as well as anti-capitalists like myself and all of you. But this is not the "capital-L" Left that I think is meant here. What I think is meant here is something more concrete and precise and smaller, sadly. Platypus is symptomatic of something about the Left today. The great slogan of Platypus is "The Left is dead, long live the Left!" What I think is interesting about Platypus is that they attempt to suture the two places where the Marxist left has retreated to in the anglophone world especially: the small parties, or, if you want to be uncharitable, sects, of largely Trotskyists, and the academic milieu. The backgrounds of the people on this panel illustrate this. To suture this is an interesting project of Platypus. I'm not necessarily opposed to the project in that sense. I think it's amusing that the architect, Chris Cutrone, has written on "Adorno's Leninism:" critical theory and Lenin, or what might also be called Trotskyism without Trotsky. This is symptomatic of the fact that the Left that Platypus seeks to provoke is a sort of absence. It's not really there; it's somewhere else, and I'm interested to hear where my co-panelists think that "somewhere else" is.

Rjurik Davidson: Does capitalism have within itself the seeds of its own transformation or destruction? If so, what does that look like; if not, what are the consequences? One famous answer of course is Rosa Luxemburg's, which she may have borrowed from Engels, that the future of capitalism is either socialism or barbarism. The argument for barbarism is compelling enough, although the kind of barbarism we're seeing is not the sort that she necessarily envisaged. What we're seeing is what I would call something like a slow apocalypse. In a certain sense, barbarism is something that we are living through now: the ongoing destruction of the biosphere, extraordinary concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, refugee crises, resource crises, and ongoing wars. At some point it may turn into something more serious, quantity may turn into quality, you may end up with a major environmental crisis: water flows to huge parts of the population suddenly stop and there are water crises. This likelihood is what makes post-apocalyptic fiction and movies popular, as a political unconscious of the moment.

Alfonso Cuaron's *Children of Men* (2006) depicts a world struck by infertility, where there are no more babies born. The UK is presided over by an authoritarian government that wages a war on the third world and tries to keep out refugees. There's an interesting contradiction in that film. The main character says it was too late for humanity before the infertility thing happened. The world had already gone to shit. In any case, these characters end up in a kind of refugee camp, and we get snapshots of the contemporary crises of the modern world: One moment they're in this refugee camp, then they're in the Middle East where there are islamic protesters marching down the street, then they're in public housing as if they are on the edges of a modern metropolis, like *les banlieues* in France or around London, then the violent state interveneres. Post-apocalyptic narratives are the political unconscious of our anxieties of the moment that come out of the situation we face. Wolfgang Streeck argues that this apocalyptic-style future is likely: "Before capitalism will go to Hell, it will for the foreseeable future hang in limbo, dead or about to die from an overdose of itself, but still very much around, as nobody will have the power to move its decaying body out of the way."[7] The idea that nobody has the power to move the decaying body of capitalism out of the way contradicts much of the classical Marxist tradition, especially that of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Marx suggests two

The "truth" of Kautsky

Comments on "Kautsky in the 21st century"

Jules Townshend

The following is a response to a virtual panel hosted by the Platypus Affiliated Society on September 5, 2020, the transcript of which was published in Platypus Review *136 (2021). The panelists were Adam J. Sacks, Ben Lewis, Jason Wright, and Chris Cutrone.*

KAUTSKY'S MARXISM COULD BE attractive for some of today's open-minded radical egalitarians. No whiff of Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet experiment that went so badly wrong, or the economically successful totalitarian, state-capitalist Chinese version. And no hint of the fossilized, denunciatory vanguardism of Trotskyite sects. This attraction also signifies a move away from the "horizontalism" of the Occupy movement, the early version of Podemos and other grassroots radical currents towards a more "realistic" politics involving some embrace of liberal representative (capitalist) democracy in promoting fundamental social change, all in the name of "democratic socialism." (We should perhaps note at the outset that there have been many discussions within Marxism about the efficacy of such institutions in achieving this objective, notably among Eurocommunists such as Carrillo and Poulantzas in the 1970s.)

The recent lively and highly informative roundtable discussion on Kautsky's legacy in the *Platypus Review* is also a valuable reminder that a practice-oriented "Western Marxism" existed before Perry Anderson famously associated this term with various practice-absent continental Marxist philosophers in his *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976). The Marxism of Kautsky and the German Social Democratic Party before the Russian Revolution of October 1917 was Western Marxism. Additionally, this discussion reaffirms just how rich in situational analysis Marxist thought is and how democratic it can be at its core.

Yet this debate raises larger questions about how today's Marxist-inclined thinkers should "receive" yesterday's "golden (or not-so-golden!) oldies" or consider what constitutes their contemporary "legacy." Given the political and emotional investment involved in these debates, there tends to be an oscillation between two distinct but interrelated issues. One relates to the "truth" *about* a thinker, involving interpretation of what they said and meant, their theoretical/political consistency and the like. The other issue has to do with implicitly or explicitly seeing the texts of a thinker *as* "truth" or "untruth," entailing issues of coherence or empirical veracity, agreeable or unfavorable ethical, methodological, strategic and political stances, or fidelity to an approved key thinker — in this case, Marx — often based on assumed or explicit shared understandings of truth. In short, what should be their legacy for "us?" Perhaps the most obvious examples of this oscillating agenda are G. A. Cohen's interpretation of Marx's theory of history (faithful to Marx and "true") and Althusser's account of Marx (the "old" Marx in contrast to the "young" Hegelian Marx as a proto-structuralist, and which is "true"). Again, looking to the more overtly politically charged debates in the 1970s, there was the issue of "the newly-discovered" Antonio Gramsci and whether the "true" Gramsci was a proto-Eurocommunist or a creative Leninist — the "truth" criterion again depending on the potentially shared understandings of different commentators. Germane to this discussion on Kautsky is whether he was, for example, a "renegade" after 1914, and therefore in his later years should no longer be a member of the Marxist club, so to speak, and no longer "our truth."

This "*as*-truth" dimension flows into the wider question of how to live with and without Marx(ism). Contexts in all their kaleidoscopic dimensions change, as do theoretical paradigms, prompting constant re-evaluation of perhaps our most treasured thoughts and beliefs, of what to reaffirm, of what to reject, and of what to combine with other perspectives in order to achieve emancipatory goals. And such reasoning leads us on to a post-Marxist terrain. Indeed, in this discussion, when exploring Kautsky's legacy and contemporary relevance, there are signs of this way of thinking, of "living" with and without Kautsky, of living with one of his "spirits" (or "ghosts," to use a Derridean formulation).

Jason Wright, in contrast to the other panelists, prefers not to live with any of Kautsky's "spirits" — although Lenin's "ghost" seems not too far away! To remain with Kautsky, Wright argues, would be anachronistic, as Kautsky's Marxism was too much a product of its time, and the "truth" *about* Kautsky suggests that he was not a "true" Marxist, as he showed no explicit commitment to the dictatorship of the proletariat and had little faith in the working class' potential as a revolutionary class. The proletariat was an "immovable object" in contrast to Luxemburg's depiction of it as an "irresistible force," and was an expression of Kautsky's political passivity in general that stemmed from a one-sided determinism. Although Wright does retreat from the "dictatorship of the proletariat" charge in the light of subsequent discussion, he still maintains that Kautsky had "illusions in the bourgeois state, implicitly preferring Lenin's state-smashing dual-power formulation.

An alternative portrayal of Kautsky can be offered, suggesting that he was faithful to the "spirit" of Marxism, that his position rested upon Marxist fundamentals, meaning, above all, that working-class self-emancipation, requiring a multifaceted democratic practice, should be at the center of the socialist project, and that political action was always condition-dependent. Strategy and tactics involved not merely an analysis of economic and social formation but "superstructural" or "cultural" considerations. An allowance had to be made for the "institutions, manners, and traditions of different countries," as Marx stated at the 1872 Hague Congress of the First International. There could be no strategic fetishization. Yet in contrast to the anarchist and Blanquist perspective, strategy and tactics could involve working "within" and "against" the bourgeois state without illusions. The effect would be to increase the space for workers' political and economic mobilization and the sense of political efficacy necessary to become a ruling class, to become capitalism's "grave-diggers." With all these considerations in mind, Marx hoped to avoid the "will" principle of politics that had either come to nothing or led to a left-wing authoritarianism implicitly modelled on the French Jacobins. There is little evidence that Kautsky thought any differently. Indeed, in strategic terms, Kautsky's focus on working-class political efficacy has interesting parallels with the late Eric Olin Wright's advocacy of "eroding" capitalism.

This brings us to the larger question of the relationship of theory and practice in Marxism. Theory can only take us so far. The contingent world in which Marxists operate is full of known unknowns and unknown unknowns, of events, external pressures demanding an active and immediate response for which there is no ready-made script, that can derail even the most perfect theory/practice relationship. Marxists, as Marx himself said, do not make history in circumstances of their own choosing. What Kautsky actually did in 1914 and during the rupturing events that followed cannot be logically derived from his prior strategic formulations. Likewise, Lenin's actions after 1917 in outlawing even sympathetic opposition parties and setting up the Cheka in 1918 cannot be judged in this light. And once the Bolsheviks were installed, the soviets, for all sorts of reasons, were hardly crucibles of workers' self-emancipation as implied in his *The State and Revolution* (1917). There was little of the dialogical vanguardism between party and soviet as suggested in his immediate, pre-revolutionary writings. An analysis of their various texts to see what is dead and living is far more useful today than the "bad" ad hominem accusations of a practice that does not necessarily follow from one's theory.

Wright suggests that there is little to be learned from Kautsky's determinism, passivity, and pessimistic view of working-class revolutionary capacities and political efficacy. Much of the recent literature on Kautsky offers a more nuanced view of the determinism/passivity couplet and his relationship to Darwin. In any case, Kautsky's Marxism can be seen as an updating elaboration of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), which drips with dialectical thought, notwithstanding any explicit reference to "the dialectic." Indeed, the working through of the dialectic in its objective form in Marx's and Kautsky's hands points to a necessary resolution in a classless society. It is this notion of a teleological, historical necessity that has often led to charges of determinism, of historical inevitability, not merely in Marx's case, but in Kautsky's too. Furthermore, estimation of the revolutionary capabilities of the proletariat could have sprung just as easily from what Kautsky saw and what were the necessary conditions for its self-emancipation. Its liberation entailed far more than the overthrow of the bourgeois state. It had to possess the political and administrative skills and the organizational capacity to become a new ruling class. True, Kautsky could be seen as someone who wanted to get all his ducks in a row, so to speak, through democratic practice well established before a revolution, but his dilemma points to a problem that all egalitarian radicals have to face in one way or another of having to make judgements not in conditions of their own choosing.

The other panelists are far less dismissive of Kautsky, whether of his historical reputation (the "truth" *about* him) or of his contemporary relevance (*as* "truth"). In Ben Lewis's case, this is true at least up to a point. For Lewis, Kautsky's significance as the unwitting "architect" of the October 1917 revolution has never been stressed enough. Yet, Kautsky "collapsed" as a thinker during the First World War and after. Lewis's striking assertion about Kautsky's influence would require much more solid argumentation than is offered. As it stands, to use a Leninist phrase, too much stick bending seems to be involved. *Prima facie*, Lenin, to be clear in his own mind about what had to be done, had to break with Kautsky, who seemed to have abandoned the Marxist notion of proletarian dictatorship and the attendant need to "smash" the state, and whose theory of imperialism failed to acknowledge that the World War that constituted the final crisis of capitalism. If Lenin still agreed with Kautsky on, for example, the need for a worker/peasant alliance, this hardly suggests that Kautsky was the revolution's "architect." Of course, if Lewis is correct about Kautsky's crypto-Bolshevism or Lenin's crypto-Kautskyianism, then many on the U.S. Left who are attracted to Kautsky might have second thoughts.

Further, if Lewis is correct on this, then Kautsky's attack on Lenin's revolutionary strategy — of which Kautsky was the "architect" — implies that in rejecting his own principles, his Marxist apostasy was even greater than has so far been acknowledged. This proposition could also give greater force to the suggestion that Kautsky "collapsed" as a thinker. Again, this line of argument would require some elaboration, especially an engagement with his writings on the Soviet Union (something flagged by fellow panelist, Chris Cutrone), such as *Bolshevism at a Deadlock* (1931). Such texts suggest that Kautsky was ploughing a rather lonely Marxist furrow, remaining true to the central Marxist vision of proletarian self-emancipation through democracy, amid all the leftist adulation of the Soviet Union (excepting, for example, Trotsky's followers and the council communists). True, Lewis proposes that this self-emancipatory vision was also at the core of Bolshevism and needs to be "rediscovered." Perhaps that was at least by implication the later Kautsky's point. This vision had been lost in the revolution's aftermath, the result of having to respond to many unforeseen contingencies, paving the way, incrementally, for a left-wing authoritarianism, something that Kautsky, following Marx, was determined to oppose.

We have to return to another element that was key to Kautsky's Marxism: the condition-dependency principle that determined the material, institutional, and cultural possibilities for and limits of political action. From the start, he was skeptical about the possibility that the Soviet Union could go for socialism alone, and asserted that Lenin was taking a huge gamble in adopting a socialist agenda in 1917 without the immediate and necessary support of successful proletarian revolutions in advanced capitalist countries. Thus, for various reasons, the question of whether there were really "two" fundamentally contrasting Kautskys, the pre-revolutionary and the post-revolutionary, remains an open one. Of course thinkers change their mind on various issues and develop over time, but we need some detail in Kautsky's case to show that he "collapsed" as a thinker, or to indicate what is meant by this term. True, he didn't have any answers that could resolve the crisis of the SPD during and after the World War, and Lenin's thinking had far greater historical purchase, but insofar as he analyzed the world through a Marxist optic, he was still able to offer fresh insights into the nature of Soviet Russia, and his critique of the Bolshevik revolution and its aftermath was not that far from many, more left-wing critiques.

Leaving this question aside, apart from Wright, the panelists affirm the "spirit" of Kautsky as our contemporary in terms of his ideal of a mass democratic and revolutionary workers' party, representing the "unfinished work and task of history" (Cutrone and Lewis) — a reminder that egalitarian radicals ought to see the bigger picture beyond the struggle for piecemeal reforms (Lewis) and to move beyond identity politics to something more universalistic (Sacks). It would seem then that for the panelists, Kautsky is more of an inspiration than a practical guide. His value lies more in what he represented than in providing a comprehensive set of theoretical tools for revolution. Yet in concluding this, aren't we merely reaffirming Marx's relevance? Isn't Kautsky's "spirit" in reality that of Marx and the later Engels, a partial fulfilment of the promise of the *Communist Manifesto*, with its optimism, its commitment to workers' self-emancipation, its opposition to sectarianism, its historical teleology, its concrete economic, social and political analysis, and so forth? For the uninitiated, Kautsky's writings might, however, have certain "gateway" properties!

And if we want to go beyond Marx, doesn't the fecundity of Gramsci's thought offer deep reflections on both the failure of Marxism to become working-class "common sense" in the West while offering hope through a refashioning of Marxism's theoretical tools, especially in the notion of "hegemony"? From this it might be possible to see that the distinction between "class" and "identity" politics is potentially a false one, that Marx through his class-in-itself / class-for-itself distinction was constructing a hegemonic revolutionary *identity* for the working class. In other words, can we not see the question of identity as at the heart of fundamental political mobilization? Of course the task of creating a mobilizing intersectional narrative which should be at the heart of a democratic socialism is not easy. Kautsky's thought, however, is a valuable reminder that such a narrative needs Marx's values and insights. **|P**

To look beyond the border fence

Reflections on "What is capitalism, and why should we be against it?"

Willam Briggs

The following is a response to a panel hosted by the Melbourne chapter of the Platypus Affiliated Society on May 22, 2021 at the Clyde Hotel in Carlton, Australia, which addressed the question, "What is capitalism, and why should we be against it?" The panelists were Rjurik Davidson, Arthur Dent, and Rory Dufficy. The transcript of the panel appears in this issue.

THE PANEL DISCUSSION ADDRESSING the question of just what capitalism is, was significant for at least two reasons. First, there was a general consensus in accepting the broad idea that capitalism is a mode of production. That is a truism which needed considerable fleshing out, or perhaps not. We all live with capitalism and have been defining it now for over 170 years. Perhaps we do not need anything more than "capitalism is a mode of production" but it hardly advances our understanding and does not offer anything like an answer to Lenin's question of "What is to be done?" The other significant issue was that after more than a century and a half, the divergences are still so wide.

For this observer, an important thing about the discussion was that fundamental change and a real challenge to the rule of capital was muted, at best. While accepting that discussion and debate prompts growth in theory, we are so often left with Marx's comment about philosophers describing the world while the point was then and is now, to find ways to change it. A question from the audience encapsulated much that is problematic. The questioner asked, in effect, why should any of you bother? He did not assume but was quite resolute in his belief that capitalism had delivered and was delivering good outcomes for all and that to change that which was working was a ridiculous idea. It was a serious question and not a "Dorothy Dix" ploy. The response was illuminating. Rjurik Davidson spoke at some length about this and of the "relativities" that become obvious. He pointed out the global nature of the working class and of the global nature of exploitation. This might have been a springboard for other aspects of class and capital, and of the ongoing relevance of Marxism but the moment passed. What preceded this question, the contributions of the three speakers, possibly led to the question and possibly explains why the moment that the question offered was lost.

There was surprisingly little overlap between the three speakers, and the order of contributions was well arranged. Rory Dufficy presented a brief and concise background to what capitalism is and how this "mode of production" operates, of the wage-labor process, and permitted a brief mention of surplus value before moving to what underpins much of the problem with the Left today. As the focal point of Dufficy's contribution was on capitalism and how it operates, it would have been good to have some issues fleshed out just a little. Capitalism is, after all, an organic compound and changes operation if not its nature.

The most noxious form that capitalism assumes today is the one that newsreaders speak of in breathless and excited tones as if, somehow, Wall Street were an indicator of how the global economy is faring. This is the capital that Marx described as "fictitious" — the capital of the speculator, the casino capitalist, the stock marketeer, where nothing is produced even as fortunes are made, where capital has no productive element but is such a powerful symbol of capitalism's utter contempt for the people.

Then there is that other capitalism — the productive capitalism that builds and exploits, that creates wealth and misery. This form has a distinct and repetitive life cycle — Marx's cycles or circuits of capital. Money capital allows productive capital to develop. Things get made. These things are translated into commodity capital. They are sold. This, in turn, produces money capital. It has a beautiful balance to it and money, we are reliably informed, makes money. It is not quite so beautiful if you are one of those who make the goods and are exploited along the way. But even so, things are made, wealth is created, lives are destroyed, and there is a certain logic to it all. Having made this observation, the fact remains that time is never a friend and it is a simple enough matter to comment without the constraint of having to watch the clock.

Rjurik Davidson, who was the second speaker did bring the audience's attention to the issue of socialism and of how the movement for socialism and particularly Marxism has suffered over the previous decades. In particular he referred to the classical tradition of Marxism and what he referred to as its idea of the inevitability of a working class "rising" (a term he used frequently) and of the inevitability of capitalist collapse and how this did not transpire. This was rather dispiriting for many in the Marxist movement. Capitalist re-stabilization and the Stalinization of Marxism led generations of Marxist thinkers to look for ways of "rescuing" Marxism. We are still paying the price for each of these rescue missions. Bit by bit the theory was eroded, and the first casualty was the working class as a vehicle for revolutionary change. Davidson did correctly identify the capitalist state's capacity to effectively co-opt opposition into the very structures of the state, although this, again, might have benefited from a little more explanation.

Somewhere along the way, something happened to theory and therefore to practice. The working class has all but been removed from the equation. Why there has been no "rising" and why capitalism remains unchallenged is a crucial issue for us all to consider. Part of the answer is the way the state manages things but that's only part of the story. The Left has aided and abetted capitalism's survival. It survives, largely as a result of the Left's collective incapacity to confront, challenge, and defeat capitalism. Generations of attacks on Marxist theory, often by "Marxists," in order to make Marxism "relevant," have seriously weakened Marxist practice. This needs a moment's reflection.

When capitalism emerged, its exploitative nature was met with opposition. The contradiction between private ownership and social production was clear. The working class reacted. The state first sought to crush opposition and then recognised that some appearance of conciliation needed to be made. Trade unions and workers' parties were legalized and given a seat at the table. They were legitimized by the state and little by little, decade by decade, they became subsumed into the state. The best that could be hoped for was that some of the worst excesses of capitalism might be ameliorated, but capital was never to be challenged.

Rjurik Davidson spoke of Luxemburg and her "socialism or barbarism" thesis, and painted a picture of challenge coming via disaster as a catalyst. It is a bleak picture. Other unresolved polemics needed to be considered. The reform-or-revolution debate should be over and yet it never is. I am not talking here about the reformism of social democracy but of political expressions, clothed in Marxist rhetoric, that either reject the working class as the leading force in society or promote struggles that ultimately cannot hope to challenge capitalist rule.

The working class is the vehicle for change, and yet we have had single-issue politics, protest politics, and the politics of identity promoted as alternative vehicles. These social movements have brought huge numbers of people into action, their causes have been just, and victories have sometimes been won, but win or lose, they dissipate. The problem is that even if a campaign is victorious, even if all of them are victorious, capitalism will not have been challenged in any fundamental way. It all has an echo to those same struggles that rent the movement a century ago — reform or revolution.

Marxist "reformers" have for generations been moving the theory away from that espoused by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, and Luxemburg. The working class was quietly shunted into a corner, relegated, its revolutionary potential ignored or denied. Some experts go so far as to dismiss the working class and all but deny its very existence. Odd, really, as capitalism continues, through its globalization of the economy, to build new contingents in every nook and cranny on the planet. At last count the global working class was four billion strong.

The final speaker, Arthur Dent, spoke from his activism of the 1960s. His view, although highly critical of much that has befallen the Left, was really a defeatist view. I share some of his misgivings about how the Left and the working class has been so poorly organized but cannot accept his premise that the Left is effectively defunct or that Marxism died. If it died then the Platypus slogan of "the Left is dead, long live the Left!" has some validity. Dent's pessimism is a by-product of the way that Marxism has been treated by well-intentioned "Marxists." It has retreated from a working-class perspective and is, therefore, hardly capable of offering the leadership that is so desperately needed. This is not some pollyannaish view, but is the view of classical Marxism, despite Davidson's less than fulsome endorsement.

The world must not merely be interpreted but changed. This requires a theory that will speak to the working class and promote political practice that will actually challenge capitalist rule. The class will listen. It always has. It is just that people stopped talking to the working class. The Marxist message has not changed. The only difference is that capitalism is far more dangerous, brutal, and destructive than at any time in its existence. It makes a response all that more pressing.

The Right is on the march and yet the working class is moving to the Left. Before the COVID pandemic, the world was ablaze. Workers, in their millions, were on the streets. They are returning to the streets again. Why? Anxiety, alienation, insecurity, inequality, and misery surround us. There is a rise of the Right, of authoritarianism. There is a real and growing threat of war. There is climate destruction and pandemic. Our world is diseased. The disease is capitalism. There is one cure for the disease. Socialism. It will not come of itself. It will not come by endlessly describing capitalism and wishing it would either get better or simply go away. It won't. It must be removed. This can only happen through political organisation that looks beyond the border fence and does not regard socialism as a "project" for future consideration. **|P**

"What is capitalism," cont. from page 2

you have read it; Rjurik, I doubt that you have.

RjD: Of course I've read it.

AD: Most people who claim they know something about Marxism haven't even read that short pamphlet, which every person who joined a working-class party used to read. The ideas that are understood to be Marxist these days are quite different. The questioner said, "Things are pretty good, and you people have made a total mess of it, so why should I be interested in you lot making a mess of it again if we are living a good life under capitalism?" I can confirm that that was the popular view and still is. That's why the Left faded away. When the 60s movement developed, it was because there was a raging Vietnam War, which was just as dramatic as what was just happening in Gaza over the last few days, and it forced people to think about politics, and it forced people to realize that their leaders were lying to them. Now that doesn't mean it's an apocalypse. While there are elements of disaster, it's like the First Intifada, in which the Palestinians in Israel are joining with the West-Bank and Gaza Palestinians. There is a sense of national unity that wasn't there before, so things are progressive, rather than going backwards. I agree with our conservative friend: The world hasn't been going backwards. People aren't very interested in the Left because their lives have been improving, and capitalism has done quite well for itself. I don't think Marxism said capitalism is too cruel to the workers. You get fucking bored with being just an employee. People would like a sense that they have a meaningful life. Most people's life consists of "I only work here, I'm being used." They are not yet up in arms about it. When they are, the capitalists haven't got a chance, there's only a handful of them left.

How does the anti-capitalism of the Left obstruct the struggle for socialism? What would anti-capitalist struggles need to become to transform the struggle for socialism?

RjD: It's obviously true that you can be anti-capitalist and not socialist. You can be anti-capitalist to analyze capitalism, you can be an anarchist or an autonomist, a variety of things that are not necessarily socialist. It's a little bit of a vague question, until we define what those terms mean.

AD: But that's the purpose of the term. Having terms like "anti-capitalist" and "neoliberal" — the purpose is to obscure the fact that you haven't got a positive program.

RjD: No, that's not the purpose necessarily. For example, in some contexts I would call myself an anti-capitalist, in some contexts I'd call myself a Marxist, and in some contexts, I'd call myself a socialist. I'd also have an understanding of who I'm talking to, what they know, what they understand. It's like the term "feminist," or "environmentalist," and when I'd call myself those things.

AD: But you couldn't possibly call yourself a communist, could you?

RjD: I would call myself a communist, yes. But not to everyone. If I was on national television right now, and they said, "Are you a communist?," I would have to have a long preamble to explain what I mean, because most people would think I support Stalinism or the Soviet Union.

AD: Yeah! I'm a communist. I do support Stalin. I regard the fascist regime in China as a fascist regime. I regarded the fascist regime in the Soviet Union as a fascist regime. But I'm for something! I'm for the communist movement.

RoD: But you'd explain on national TV that you are pro-Stalin and anti-Soviet Union?

AD: It's not a very difficult concept when Khrushchev gets up there and says he's a mass murderer.

RoD: "Who's Khrushchev?" That's the first question you'd get.

AD: Well, you are right about that.

RjD: All anti-capitalist struggles allow us to explain what it is we are against, and what it is we are for. It is most important to get people active and organized, not just passive recipients of ideas, but self-generators of their own ideas, finding out for themselves what they believe, in dialogue with us, because we are all learning and should continue to learn. Anti-capitalist struggles give us an opportunity to discuss. I have a particular perspective in an anti-capitalist struggle. I would say, "Great, I'm against capitalism, you are against capitalism, let's talk about what that means." For me that means transforming this mode of production into a mode of production that serves humans and the environment, and puts human needs and the environment before the needs of corporations before the needs of profit. I would hope to take that anti-capitalist movement in a direction we could call socialist, what we could call amongst a select group communist, but we'd have to explain what that meant.

RoD: I think that's an interesting question. There are Catholic neo-reactionaries for example. There's a whole series of right-wing movements that oppose the progressive elements of capitalism, which Arthur talked about and the vast majority of the Left wishes to preserve — barring anarcho-primitivists. Online there's a certain overlap between reactionary anti-capitalism and forms of left-wing anti-capitalism that I think is probably not helpful and could do with more clarity around questions of what we are for. I think it's fine to talk about anti-capitalism. I would always describe myself as a communist, and when I do, the response I get is, "So you believe in an authoritarian or totalitarian government?", which is why I hate talking about it.

AD: There used to be a socialist movement that honestly and sincerely believed in reforming capitalism along a parliamentary road, that step-by-step nationalizing industries, building up social welfare and so on, you could transform capitalism into socialism, and that movement was called social democracy or socialist parties. It did exist, and it was very strong, and it fought the communists bitterly, and we, the communists, fought it bitterly. Classically, that movement itself became so bankrupt and people got embarrassed to call themselves socialists anymore, so they just said, "we're anti-capitalists." They became "Keynesian." They said, "If we only had better, more Keynesian policies. We're against the center-right parties, not spending enough on social welfare, they aren't doing this and that right. We want to support the Labor party, we want to support the Democrats in the U.S. We can't call ourselves socialist anymore, so what do we call ourselves, well, we are against neoliberalism."

But they aren't for anything. There isn't a Left saying, "We want to take power and change the world." That's not the position of the pseudo-Left that exists today. Their position is "We'd like to appeal to everybody and say, if you've got anything that you are uncomfortable about, please come to our very boring meetings."

You touched on how capitalism is a mode of production developing itself over time. I was wondering if this development is necessary for society, and whether capitalism has reached its highest development point, its turning point, or will it keep developing to infinity.

AD: I'd recommend chapter three of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* on historical materialism. Capitalism is developing. Marx's argument wasn't, "Oh, it's being cruel to the workers," but that it's developing in an inevitable direction which will end up with the workers taking power. As capitalism develops as it becomes a more and more productive system, it becomes more and more natural that the working class will take power.

RjD: At the same time, capitalism is running up against its limits in terms of the biosphere. One of the things about capitalism is that it tends to need to grow economically, roughly 3% a year. At some point, it's going to hit some kind of a limit. I'd also like to respond to the question on why Marxism failed, but I respect Arthur's belief: "In the beginning was the Word."[18]

AD: *"Im Anfang war die Tat!"* ("In the beginning was the deed!") The Torah says "the Word," Mephistopheles says "the deed."[19]

RjD: I find that to be doctrinaire, I find the obsession with words to be an obsession with doctrines and manuscripts, and I don't think that's something that we should cleave too closely to. I think the content is more important, rather than the form you are using.

RoD: One of the interesting things about capitalism is the way in which centers of accumulation have moved to larger and larger geographic and economic units.[20] It starts in the city states of Italy, and then moves to the Netherlands, and then to England, and then the United States, and then finally to China. There is no other China. There is no other state of comparable size and dynamism that can come after China. It might not come in our lifetime, I don't think it will, but there will be a point at which there is no peasantry to draw from. And this is where the moving contradiction I mentioned in the beginning comes into play. Capital needs labor, but constantly discards it like trash, and that can't go on forever. **|P**

Transcribed by Liam Kenny and Ryan Mickler.

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[1] Friedrich Engels, "Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx" (1883), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm/>.

[2] Alberto Asor Rosa, "The End of the Cultural Battle" (1964), <https://polemos.online/2021/04/05/the-end-of-the-cultural-battle-quaderni-rossi-n-21964/>.

[3] Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Section 1 (1867), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm/>.

[4] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Notebook VII (1857), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch14.htm/>.

[5] Karl Marx, "Preface," in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm/>.

[6] Frederic Jameson, "Marx and Montage," *New Left Review* 58 (2009), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii58/articles/fredric-jameson-marx-and-montage/>.

[7] Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2016).

[8] [RjD:] See Peter Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2010), 133–155.

[9] Chris Cutrone, "Vicissitudes of historical consciousness and possibilities for emancipatory social politics today: 'The Left is Dead — Long Live the Left!,'" *Platypus Review* 1 (2007), <https://platypus1917.org/2007/11/01/vicissitudes-of-historical-consciousness-and-possibilities-for-emancipatory-social-politics-today/>.

[10] [AD:] This 1960s joke was not aimed at Karol Modzelewski or the Frankfurt School or any claim of a connection between them, but at Monash University student "Marxians" who wrote footnotes about theorists from other times and places instead of studying, let alone participating in, the struggle around them.

[11] Cf. "Red Eureka Movement" (1977), <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/australia/bombard.htm/>.

[12] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" (1848), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm/>.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Engels, "Preface to the 1888 English Edition," in ibid.

[15] Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976).

[16] V. I. Lenin, "Notes of a Publicist" (1922), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/feb/x01.htm/>.

[17] [AD:] See my "Radicals — remembering the sixties and Panel Discussion tomorrow Sat 22 May," *C21st Left* (2021), <https://c21stleft.com/2021/05/21/radicals-remembering-the-sixties-and-panel-discussion-tomorrow-sat-22-may/>.

[18] John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," which references the opening line of the Torah, or Book of Genesis 1:1.

[19] From Goethe's *Faust*, Scene 3, "The Study." Faust is reading from John 1:1 in the New Testament and the Spirit (Mephistopheles) guides him to write "In the Beginning was the Deed (Act)."

[20] [RoD:] See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2010).

different interrelated ways capitalism undermines and destroys itself. There is a structural conflict between the relations of production and the productive forces, that is, our ability to distribute what we produce and our ability to produce. The more we gain an ability to produce, that comes into conflict with the way that we organize it, and he says that when that conflict occurs, that is the moment of crisis, it's the moment that later gets talked about as wars and revolutions. That is the basis for the idea that capitalism has a progressive phase, in which it grows and expands and builds amazing things, and a regressive or destructive phase, that it's a kind of parabola or bell-curve, and that at some point we enter this declining phase of capitalism.

But Marx suggests another driver: a question of agency. He says there is an agent, the working class, based on its subject position, that of wage laborers, that has an interest and ability to destroy, overthrow, or transform the system: They're the gravediggers of capitalism. By the early 20th century, with the influx of positivism into Marxism, you get a sense of the inevitability of this transition. Marxists start to suggest this is happening naturally like a "law of history." Part of the evidence they see is the growth of these mass social-democratic parties, and this idea of inevitability tends to get partly shattered by World War I and the crises that follow. Suddenly we're not headed towards inevitable socialism, things aren't a matter of progress, and these laws of history seem to be more complicated. The generation of that time, the great generation of Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky, begins to think this is a question of political strategy: We need to think about politics. They make a lot of innovations. Lenin develops an idea of imperialism: Imperialism and the exploitation of the colonial world allows the development of bureaucracies and aristocracies within the working class; and on the basis of this a new type of capitalist party emerges, what we would call the social-democratic or labor parties. This tripartite scheme is really his innovation. But Lenin still has the idea that the working class is going to rise up with a certain kind of inevitability. Towards his last years Lenin starts to doubt this. The main continuation of his thought is in Trotsky's last great programmatic document, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (1938). The death agony of capitalism is a reference to that declining state of capitalism: Capitalism is in crisis, it is going to throw up wars and revolutions inevitably because of its tendency to crisis, and the population will rise up and sweep away all these bureaucracies and capitalist rulers and the state, and lay the path for the growth of a left organization, and this will occur like a natural law, a wave, or a weather pattern. If you had lived between the years 1900 and 1945, it would not be implausible: You have seen two world wars, fascism, anti-colonial movements. If you lived anywhere in eastern Europe in those years, you would not necessarily predict the long boom after World War II and the period of quietude and peace.

One figure from that classical period who tries to theorize beyond those coordinates is Antonio Gramsci. He asks, what if these crises of capitalism don't result in the political upsurge of the working class? What if that upsurge ends up being caught up in the labyrinths of these great complexes of capitalist society? He introduces the notion of "passive revolution."[8] Like all of Gramsci's ideas from his *Prison Notebooks* (1929–35), this is experimental — he is not writing a book but thinking things out. He starts with the transition from feudalism to capitalism and says, how did most societies make this transition? Why didn't they look like the French Revolution of 1789? Why did they look like they were in fact managed? They were passive. Popular mobilizations and upsurges were integrated into a top-down process. He transfers that idea into an idea of how capitalism tends to work. It modernizes itself and incorporates or absorbs popular uprisings into its own political project. That is, the capitalist organizations, parties, and structures as a whole manage to transform it through its different phases and at the same time hold the opposition in check.

This is a development on Lenin's ideas about capitalist bureaucracies, working-class aristocracies, and labor parties, but it is recast in a more complex social theory and a different theory of the state. Rather than collapse into pessimism, Gramsci says Marxists must develop an even more complex political strategy, since the crises themselves are not enough to radicalize people against the system. Gramsci is essentially arguing for an idea of politics as dominant.

Since those classical debates, there have been variations on these themes, though probably not great developments beyond these themes. You have foci of Guevarism, the development of autonomous zones within capitalism, culture wars and identity politics in the contemporary first world, and each of them wrestle with this fundamental problem of the subject capable of transforming capitalism in some way, given that the system itself does not seem to be self-undermining in the way that many of those first generations thought it would. It seems capable of a flexibility and transformation that is surprising to the Left. This flexibility and the ability of capitalism to absorb the countervailing tendencies that shocked so many leftists of the 60s and 70s into their later conservatism.

To me Gramsci is right that the way in which crises occur and the way that they are constructed and understood politically is crucial to how they play out. We have seen at least two serious crises lately, the global financial crisis (GFC) and the COVID-19 pandemic, and despite those crises, we have not seen large upsurges in anti-capitalist tendencies. However you want to interpret the Sanders or Corbyn phenomena, we have not seen the kind of anti-capitalist movements that would have been imagined by the classical tradition. We have seen another spate of zombie movies.

Arthur Dent: I've felt like a fish out of water since the 60s. There's been quite a few mentions on the panel about the collapse of the Left since the 60s and 70s, in my view it had collapsed pretty much by the 70s. What's referred to as the "Left" by the rest of the panel, to me, does not actually exist. There hasn't been something that I would regard as a left movement since then. Everyone in my age group here are friends of mine and were all part of that movement from the 60s, and would have some different views and some similar views, which I think have basically nothing in common with what is called the Left today. I was very surprised by Rory saying that capitalism is a mode of production because I'd agree with that. That is Marxist, and he's right. I'd like to know what Rjurik's definition of capitalism is. I didn't get the impression he agrees with me from anything else he said.

Capitalism is a mode of production that's based on wage labor, that the complete generalization of commodity exchange through money does take place when labor itself is a commodity. And pretty well every worker knows that; they know that "they only work here." They know that they work for somebody else, and at the moment it doesn't bother them much. The reason there isn't a Left is because there isn't a sense of mass dissatisfaction and revolt against the basic system of wage labor that we have. It's not true that there was a revolutionary period from 1900–1945 and nothing since. It's true that that was a classical period, that that was where our strongest revolutionary traditions came from, but there was a small left movement in the 60s. It was small. It was a minority. Even after the GFC, there was an Occupy movement. I did take part in that: Its politics were absolutely dreadful; it was anarchist mumblings. Nevertheless, it did exist. Currently, as far as I can make out in the western world, it simply doesn't exist.There are various groups of intellectuals who are talking about various intellectual things. I'm an intellectual, I come from not a petty bourgeois background, but a big bourgeois intellectual background, and as I'm inclined as a theoretician, there's definitely a role for intellectuals in the working-class movement. But fundamentally, it's the working class that will move and shake the world, and the parties that it builds are not built from the sort of discussion Rjurik raised about apocalypse. It's part of our theoretical task to fight the apocalypse-mongers. The reasons the working class has been relatively quiescent in countries like Australia is they've been doing alright. It's not that they are crushed, ground under, and have a sense of imminent social decay and disaster. The reason the small Left that existed in the 60's faded away very rapidly was that we won on the Vietnam War! We were openly campaigning for the Vietnamese to win, we were flying the Vietnamese flag, and they won. Ever since then, the pseudo-Left has been continuing to make U.S. imperialism the number one enemy. They tried to have a movement around both Gulf wars, and they tried to relive something. It was mentioned that around 2004 activists met people who said, "Don't make the mistakes we made." There were very few activists from the Vietnam War era who had anything to do with those Iraq War protests, because we weren't into trying to maintain fascist regimes in power just because the Americans wanted to kick them out. It just wasn't the kind of politics we had. There were some who did that. Tariq Ali, who was a notorious Trotskyist in the Vietnam period, was active in the anti-Vietnam movement and was quite hysterical about Iraq. There are such cases. But as a generation, no, we weren't part of any of what's regarded as left activities since, except for things like the Occupy movement, as you could see there was something alive there. You could see that there are young people wanting to protest about something, and you could relate to that.

I agree with Platypus's slogan, "The Left is dead! Long live the Left!" That has got the right dialectical tone to it, and I congratulate them on it. But Chris Cutrone's article explaining that excellent slogan was preceded by "Vicissitudes of historical consciousness and possibilities for emancipatory social politics today: The Left is dead. Long live the Left!"[9] Now, that language has nothing in common with the slogan. The slogan is an excellent example of a brilliant, succinct, mobilizing, through-provoking slogan. Yet the Frankfurt School comes up with this pompous intellectual phrase-mongering, which I do remember from the 60s. We had people who called themselves the "New Left," and were very much into Adorno, Horkheimer, and so on. I can just vaguely remember their names, I think there was someone called [Karol] Modzelewski, because we wrote jokes in our newsletter, we would add "Modzelewski Notes."[10] There was a movement going on, and these people were sitting in a cafe discussing the Frankfurt School; they just weren't part of the movement. I'm not suggesting that Platypus is the same, but I am suggesting you get over the Frankfurt School. The only one I actually read was Henryk Grossman and he was originally a Bundist and then more of a communist than a Frankfurt School type, but I read him because he had an opposite view to [Pavel] Maksakovsky, who I'm very much in agreement with. Grossman made some sense. But when I look at the Frankfurt School, they are not talking about politics. The Left is a political movement, it's about politics.

When you ask, "What role does the class struggle play in left politics?," you are putting it backwards. It should be, "What role does the Left play in the class struggle?" We educate, agitate, and organize. I'm speaking in that broader sense of the Left. There's also a role for vanguard parties, tactics, and leadership. But the concept of the Left is a political movement that is fighting political battles with opposing classes. Now there are some real battles that I think are coming up. My contribution will be on the theoretical front, and that's intellectualizing if you like, but I'm particularly studying the capitalist cycle. I recommend Pavel Maksakovsky's book *The Capitalist Cycle*. He wrote it when he was 29 years old in 1929, and he was writing in opposition to the prevailing view amongst Bolsheviks that the revolution was imminent, and he was explaining the cyclic nature of capitalism: You have a series of cycles in its process of development and change. We need to understand that Marxian theory of the cycle, because we are very clearly heading towards one.

I must confess, that was also my view in 1980, after the "Red Eureka" movement[11] collapsed and we ceased to exist because we didn't want to become just another sect. I was writing then about unemployment and revolution in preparation for the coming crisis, and that was about 40 years too early, so I won't attempt to make any predictions as to how imminent it is. But there is something really weird about an economy in which you've got zero and negative interest rates. This is not just since COVID: Since the great financial crisis they haven't had a full crisis. They were able to postpone it, but I don't think it can be postponed forever. What remains postponed is any understanding of economics among anything that could be plausibly connected to the Left. Marxism was famous for the fact that Marx knew a hell of a lot more about economics than the bourgeois economists did, whereas what passes for the Left these days is famous for its abysmal ignorance of economics. I call upon Platypus to study Marx's capital and study Maksakovsky's theory of the cycle. Forget the Frankfurt school. They will contribute nothing to it. I find Hegel very difficult to read, but that's different from the Frankfurt School making this unreadable because they've got nothing to say.

The ruling class's central line is, "There is no alternative," and that's correct. Nobody is currently proposing any alternative way to run a modern industrial society. The people talking about apocalypse have got no conception of what a modern industrial society is. They think they are living in some kind of nightmare, whereas most of the working class knows they are not. The people who've got various proposals for reform — the latest I've seen from the Sanders social democratic wing of the Democrat party is the "Magic Money Tree," they call it Modern Monetary Theory. It's some kind of theory that the only reason things aren't being done properly is that they aren't printing enough money. That childish kind of politics can't possibly build a movement.

Today, the Left is mistaken for people into culture, identity politics, apocalypse, greenies, the environment, "we're all doomed." Their politics is outright reactionary. They are not in favor of modernity and progress. What used to be a communist movement has become an anti-capitalist movement, because it unites anyone against capitalism, and that covers not only liberals and social democrats as was explicitly mentioned, but pretty well any reactionary. Here's the *Communist Manifesto* on capitalism:

> The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.[12]

That can't plausibly be described as an anti-capitalist manifesto, it's a *communist* manifesto. It's got page after page of a paean to the revolutionary impact of capitalism in sweeping aside the old order:

> The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of Nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground — what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?[13]

What's called the Left these days is naturally and instinctively against all of that. The people who go on about apocalypse really don't want men or women to face the actual social relations that exist. They really don't like the uncertainty and agitations. They want a more stable and simpler life.

On that note, the "neoliberal order" is a term that came into existence long after the 60s movement faded. It was a term invented so that the social democrats could stop calling themselves socialists, whereas Engels said, "We couldn't call it a socialist manifesto because in 1847 when we wrote it, socialism was a bourgeois movement, and communism was a working class movement." By working class, I mean everyone that works for an employer, which is pretty much everyone these days. The working class is now dominant throughout the planet. In Marx's time it was only about half the population in urban areas of England. The working class is larger than it's ever been and at a higher cultural level than ever. It has better politics than it's ever had, except for the absence of the Left. The actual working-class outlook is vastly more progressive than it was in the 60s, and that's true worldwide. The working class has a higher standard of living than ever. Writing off the working class when it's now the majority of the population of the globe, and the overwhelmingly dominant population of the western countries — even intellectuals used to be bourgeois intellectuals. These days, most university graduates come from a working-class background.

Responses

RoD: One way of dialectically uniting the point of tension between Rjurik and Arthur around this question of apocalypse is to adapt William Gibson and talk about the way the apocalypse is already here, it's just unevenly distributed. I don't think it looks much like an apocalypse on a beautiful Melbourne winter's day like today, but if it was in Gaza or Xinjiang, or parts of Africa, I'd feel somewhat differently. The history of capitalism is in some sense the history of the abolition of the peasantry. Human society up until very recently has almost universally engaged in agricultural labor in one sort of another, and only a very select elite were able to do anything else at all, including reading, writing, making art. The great potential of capitalism is that it creates the conditions in which that bounty of culture and free time could be available to everyone, but to do so requires the abolition of the peasantry in a more or less violent process from the famines in Ireland to the 80s in China. That story will mark out the 20th century. It's the attempt to theorize that that makes Marxism the golden intellectual thread that runs throughout the 20th century, from the classical Marxism Rjurik focused on, to the hinge figure of Gramsci and what [Perry] Anderson will call "Western Marxism,"[15] which Arthur excoriates so much. I would want to put in a word of defense for the Frankfurt School. You can read them symptomatically, which is Anderson's point, as a product of a defeat, which Gramsci begins to theorize from prison: the defeat of the mass working-class movements in Europe after the end of the first world war.

It would be globally incorrect to say that the 60s Left was small. I think that the movement in the 60s was not centered on Europe, it was small in highly developed capitalist countries including our own and Europe and North America, but in South America, China, across Asia, it's as substantial as 1915. The movement for decolonization that begins immediately after World War II, if we look at it *sub specie aeternitatis*, is the more important movement than some ruptures in western Europe.

AD: You say there was a movement up until 1945, and it collapsed and therefore you've got western Marxism, academic Marxism, and empiricist Trotskyist sects ever since. But it's not true. Trotskyist sects existed in the 60s, but they were in no way dominant in the movement. The academic Marxists existed in the 60s but had very little to do with the movement; yet there was a movement.

RoD: I think that the mass movement actually runs from 1850 through to the 1970s. In the 60s and 70s you have the Communist Parties of France and Italy.

AD: It didn't run through, it died out in the 50s.

RoD: This is where we disagree, but in the 50s is where there is the electoral height of the French and Italian Communist Parties.

AD: Exactly, the electoral death of the Communist movement in France and Italy.

RoD: When Arthur says "the Left was dead in the 50s, and it doesn't matter that the largest Communist Parties were winning massive amounts of votes." Well it does count, and the only way it doesn't count is to have this really selective definition of the Left as the parts of the Left you agree with, or the parts that aren't sellouts or aren't fake or aren't pseudo-Left. The point is, there are always sellouts and fakes and pseudo-Lefts from our particular perspective. But historically the Left only begins to decline in the 60s and 70s. It is hugely successful in the 50s and early 60s, and it falls from a very high peak, not to mention mass communist parties across Asia and the Soviet Union.

RjD: There was a mass left in the 60s and 70s, both in the West and the third world. When I mentioned Gramsci's idea of passive revolution, I meant he wasn't a pessimist in the sense that there's no way forward, that there's no potential to change capitalism. He simply concluded that it required a more complex and sophisticated strategy and tactics than had up until then been developed.

Arthur, we disagree on the question of apocalypse. We are living through a slow apocalypse, from an international perspective. Yes, we are living on a nice, sunny Melbourne day — most of us have relatively pleasant lives. However, yesterday, 20,000 high school students came out on strike in Melbourne. One of the most significant social movements recently has been the school strikes for climate. These students and young people are smart, they understand what the future looks like for capitalism. This is an anti-capitalist question, and if you want to define what happens after capitalism as communism, that's okay, and we can debate what that would look like.

The central fact is, in my opinion, that you cannot run a profit-driven system, capitalism, and at the same time save the environment. They are in fundamental contradiction. That's what makes those rallies significant, and that's what makes them important. And that's what makes it important for the Left to relate to. Not only to relate to, but to encourage it as much as possible. It's the self-activity of people that will bring them to political understanding. Arthur's denigration of that, by putting the greenies in with the reactionaries, is a reactionary statement. To divide this question from the question of the working class is wrong. I'm sorry if I'm misrepresenting you, I certainly don't want to misrepresent you.

AD: Perfectly accurate representation.

RjD: I'm glad we are on the same page. He's right that what I said, just because of time, was very schematic. It is true that there was the Occupy movement; I was down there. There's been a series of resistances, but the question I want to pose to the audience is how is it that these things get absorbed and integrated so easily? How is it that we end up so weak? Capitalism is super strong. Gramsci's notions of passive revolution, strategic thought, and a need for a more sophisticated tactics are useful.

AD: I wanted to take up the expression "The Left is Dead!" as applied to both the 1950s and 1970s, and 1914. Rosa Luxemburg was quoted by Lenin saying, "Social Democracy had become a stinking corpse" in the first world war, and Lenin praised her[16] for that enormous contribution to the birth of the Third International. The social democratic parties supported the various sides in the first world war for the workers to slaughter each other, and it was then a corpse. Social democrats were then the enemies that the Left fought from that time on.

Likewise, by the 60s, the mass communist parties, which really only existed in the western world in France and Italy, had become social democrat parties, and they were electorally popular, and they were the *main enemies* of the 60s Left. It wasn't a matter of sectarian differences: To build an anti-Vietnam War movement in Melbourne we fought the Communist Party. They had Jim Cairns, who was deputy prime minister eventually, as a front for them. He was much better than them, he was a genuine united-front person. We had regular mass meetings at Richmond Town Hall, of hundreds of people arguing out the strategy and tactics, and the Communist Party was always in the way. In the student movement they formed the New Left group and went on about the Frankfurt School, but they were recognized as the enemy. The Trotskyists insisted on calling them Stalinists, which was an odd perspective, because the Maoists were Stalinists, and the revisionist Communist Party were virulently anti-Stalinist. But the reality of the 60s Left was that it rose in direct opposition to those communist parties. In France the Communist Party was physically trying to smash them. They had fascist thugs wearing communist regalia who were fighting against the radical students. I draw on that tradition to say that when there's a Left again it will be vigorously fighting against these hostile trends. That's not sectarianism. It's sectarian to just talk to yourself and to promote some individual idea. There's nothing sectarian about the fact that the history of the left has always been a history of class struggle within the Left.

Q&A

Adorno said that society is the concept of the Third Estate. You all agreed that capitalism is a mode of production. To what extent is capitalism a crisis of the mode of production.

AD: "Crisis" gets thrown around a lot, in different ways. There is a political crisis going on in mainstream politics. Both parties collapsed in France, and Macron swept in, and he's now the least popular president probably in French history. and now it looks like they could even have the National Front, far-right Le Pen being the next president. In the U.S. you had Trump, and you've now got the Democrats. Clearly the political system is in paralysis and falling to bits. In Australia it's just decaying gently. But there's no sense of life in bourgeois politics, so you could call that a crisis.

I prefer to reserve the word "crisis" for sharp, sudden events. I believe there's a slow-moving crisis in bourgeois politics. As for the crisis of capitalism, Marx does have a theory; he left only fragments of the theory. To me, it wasn't a theory of collapse, like Henryk Grossman had. Marx was describing a capitalist cycle, in the course of which there are political upheavals, and that eventually there's going to be a political overthrow through the workers taking power of the state. But we should understand the capitalist cycle, because if there's ever going to be a Left taking power, it's going to have to run the economy. It's going to have to be able to say what it's going to do about mass unemployment, and the sorts of things we can expect to result from the capitalist cycle. But we are currently not in a phase like the Great Depression, and we haven't had one since the last great depression. It's a very unusual period, it's quite different from the analysis Marx did in the 19th century. But we need to understand what Marx did study in the 19th century, if we are going to understand 20th-century capitalism. And if you are going to understand 21st-century capitalism, you're going to need to understand the 20th century. People are making up theories about what's going on in the economy now without having that historical concept.[17]

Marxism was invented for the reason of cruelty to the working class, but there's no need for that anymore. What would be the point of getting rid of a system that is working and treating everyone equally?

RjD: Are there some injustices in the world? Are there some things that are unfair? Think not just about Australia, but about other places in the world. We are a relatively privileged society, where we have a relative amount of freedom and wealth. Where are your clothes made? I'm going to make a guess that your T-shirt was probably made in India or Cambodia. Who made the thread? How did it get transported here? This is true of all of us, not just your T-shirt. I've travelled amongst the Indonesian factory workers who make pots and pans. I realized one worker did not have one of his fingers whole anymore because the factory he was working in didn't have any protective equipment. Those pots and pans were ending up in Australia. We are part of this system, and we have a kind of privilege, and that we benefit from the exploitation of other people is unfair. That is something that I care about. What do you want from your life, what kind of world do you want your kids to grow up in? Do you want them to grow up in a world where there is a Great Barrier Reef, where there are forests, where there is a diversity of plants? There won't be those aspects of the environment. Look at Australian working conditions: increased flexibility and casualization. Jobs have gotten harder and more exploitative in Australia. The Left is a group of people who are concerned about those things. We've got to make it a little bit better. We've got the wealth to do it. It's just that that wealth is just in the top 1%.

Why did Marxism fail in the 20th century?

RoD: It didn't. Marxism describes a set of practices as well as an intellectual tradition from the social democratic organizational practices to more experimental forms pioneered in "autonomia" or indeed in sectarian practices like the Red Brigades. It is an intellectual tradition that essentially forms the central structure of at least European thought, and increasingly global thought, over the last 150 years. It is also the name for a set of political regimes that no longer exist, and finally it's the supervening ideology of the most important country of the 21st century. When you have China being officially Maoist, it seems crazy to talk about the defeat of Marxism.

AD: Oh be fair!

I'd like to respond to both questions. Clearly Marxism disappeared. I was a hard-left socialist when I was 14, and I was an apparatchik in the Labor Party. I was on the Young Labor Association executive, and there was some memory of Marxism. I read *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880) before I became a communist. It was still circulating in labor-movement circles. That short pamphlet, it's only about 40–50 pages, is the only popular summary of what that Marxist world outlook is about. It's not the *Communist Manifesto*; it's certainly not *Capital*. It gave the essence of what the Marxist position was, and pretty well anyone who became an activist in either the Second International or the Third International read it and had some idea of the concepts in it. Now, that's been completely lost. All the various groups that claim to be Marxist have never read it. Rory, I'm sure

"What is capitalism" continues on page 4